



# **Large Jail Network Bulletin**



# Controlling Gangs Through Teamwork and Technology

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**G**angs are not new to America's jails and prisons. Their existence can be traced to post-colonial times, as they emerged shortly after America changed its style of facility operations from penitentiary settings (in which inmates had no contact with each other) to congregate settings. The gangs in our facilities may originally have been protectionist in nature, but they have evolved into something quite different and significantly more problematic. They have become bolder and more sophisticated.

Gangs' philosophies often conflict with the responsibilities and mandates of those who are legally charged with their care, custody and control. They actively recruit members, and they network with affiliates outside the jail. Some of the larger, better organized gangs fiercely demand unquestioned loyalty and compliance, with disloyalty or non-compliance being sufficient reason for imposing a range of penalties—even a death sentence. Their ever-increasing numbers, as well as their level of complexity and sophistication, make gangs a force that

corrections and law enforcement can ill afford to ignore.

Just as gangs are not new to our jails, neither are they rare. They are part of our social fabric. Gangs have existed for centuries in various cultures throughout the world. America, the world's "melting pot," has incorporated many of the earth's inhabitants into its social structure, simultaneously incorporating both the positive and negative aspects of their indigenous cultures. This has greatly influenced America's own culture, with gangs on occasion making significant (albeit notorious) contributions to its history.

It is not surprising, then, that our jails and prisons, as microcosms of the greater society, include gangs among their populations. Nor is it surprising that it is our large jails—like our large urban areas—that experience the most serious gang-related problems.

## **The Problems Gangs Pose to Jail Management**

The behavior of gangs ranges from disruptive to dangerous. The psychology of gang behavior cannot co-exist with institutional behavior,

i.e., with behavior required of people who are incarcerated.

As in the free society, inter-gang conflicts occur in jails. One significant type of conflict is territorial. Such "turf" wars pose a greater threat in jail than in the free society because most large jails have little if any excess space, so it is impossible for gangs to separate and establish boundaries. Encroachment is a natural consequence of jails, whose already limited space is in many

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instances exacerbated by crowding. If gangs and their behavior are allowed to exist and proliferate, the risks to security, other inmates, and staff escalate.

Another reason for prohibiting gangs is the likelihood of intra-gang conflicts. Battles for leadership or the consequences of gang "splinter" factions disagreeing with the main body are amplified due to lack of space, which minimizes the possibility of "backing off" and "saving face."

Perhaps the most important reason for disallowing gang behavior in jail is the gang's need to challenge authority. This is a basic characteristic of gang behavior, and in some instances the reason the gang has formed. If there is anything a jail administration unequivocally cannot tolerate, it is any unlawful or unsanctioned challenge to its authority. Gang behavior is the antithesis of institutional behavior simply because the element of control is key to both. Gangs and gang behavior cannot be tolerated in the jail environment, because power and authority cannot be shared. One has only to review the history of our nation's jails and prisons to understand the disruptive, and all too often tragic consequences of such challenges.

Most challenges to authority involve collective rather than individual participation. In some instances, disruption is a planned activity of

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organized gangs. In other situations, disruption is a spontaneous or unplanned activity of individuals, which, if left unchecked, can evolve into collective behavior indicative of gang activity. Whether organized or loose-knit, neither type of disruption is acceptable, and jail administrators today recognize the need to be

preemptive rather than reactive in addressing gang behavior.

### **Background: New York City Department of Correction**

The New York City Department of Correction, at peak operating capacity, has a total of 22,871 beds in sixteen facilities. Approximately 85 percent of those beds are in ten facilities located on Rikers Island, a 432-acre island, triangulated by LaGuardia Airport and the boroughs of Bronx and Queens. One of the Rikers Island facilities has two floating annexes, which are ferry-boats converted for use as jails.

Among the jails on Rikers Island are an infirmary and a specially-equipped facility devoted to inmates with communicable diseases. The remaining six facilities are located in four of the five boroughs of New York City, including an 800-bed self-contained,

**completely equipped floating facility moored in the Bronx. The department has four hospital wards,**

including one for terminally ill inmates, and a Transportation Division. In addition, it operates four major court detention facilities that expedite court appearances in the five boroughs.

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lied as members of thirty-two different gangs and gang-like organizations. These gangs range from large, well-organized gangs such as the Bloods, Crips, and Latin Rings, which have national reputations and affiliations, to smaller local groups. They run the gamut in terms of ethnicity, age, and gender.

### **Components of the Gang Control Program**

The New York City Department of Correction has put in place a program that has proven successful in controlling gang behavior. The program is based on both teamwork and technology. Its result has been a major reduction in violence attributable to gangs, as well as equally significant reductions in other problems associated with gangs in jails. What follows is a brief explanation of how the department's efficient and cost-effective program was successfully implemented.

#### **Phase 1: Database on gangs.**

The first phase in developing the program was to initiate an effective intelligence and communications network that would accurately indicate how many inmates have gang affiliations, which gangs they are affiliated with, and their status within those gangs. The database also provides information on which facilities gang members are in and their institutional classification.

All this information provides the department with data on the proliferation or concentration of any group, so

that it can forecast where or when a build-up of a particular group could cause problems. Strategic transfers and other movements assist the department in controlling the establishment of gang power bases and in ensuring that some individuals do not have undue influence over others. This undertaking, successful largely due to the team effort of the department's Security Risk Group Unit and the various facilities of the department, has led to the implementation of additional technology that makes the department's program even more effective.

### **Phase 2: Digitized imaging**

**program.** As a second phase, the New York City Department of Correction has developed a digitized imaging program that offers numerous advantages for identifying gang members and their status, behavior, and control. The complete history and personal data of gang members are recorded, and digitized images (front and side) are taken.

Digitized images are also made of any tattoos, distinguishing marks, or scars. These images are sharper than those usually obtained by film, thereby negating the need for taking additional photographs, or for film storage or development. The digitized images are entered into a computer and downloaded into the database. The process takes about two minutes per individual and results in a permanent record that can be promptly updated as circumstances warrant.

Each facility is able to update records quickly. Changes are simultaneously downloaded to a central repository so the department has expedient, accurate information regarding new gang members or changes in the status of current members.

An advantage of this system is that it is possible to conduct single and multiple searches on the basis of any data in the file. For instance, if one inmate gang member reported being attacked by another inmate but could not identify the inmate by name, a timely departmental search could be accomplished based on any information the victim could give us. If the victim stated that the attacker was about five feet tall, with a moustache, and that he had a tattoo of a dragon on the right hand, a computerized departmental search could be expeditiously conducted. Every registered person in the entire gang network who fit that description would be displayed on the screen in a photo array-constituting a virtual "computerized line-up." Screens could also be altered to focus on points of interest, by enlarging images of areas in which there are scars, tattoos, or other distinguishing marks.

**A** major operational advantage is that the system can either be stationary or portable. If it is neither safe nor prudent to bring inmates to a specific site, then an ordinary camcorder with a flash attachment or a digitized camera can be taken to the site. After the pictures are taken, they can be returned to where they can either be digitized or

downloaded, depending on the equipment used. This is an additional advantage if a crime scene must be photographed. The digitized image of the crime scene can be enlarged on command, which is much more efficient than using the time-consuming process of enlarging prints off a negative.

### **Advantages Provided by the System**

It is possible to query the system about specific affiliations between gang members, who visits them, and if their visitors are visiting other gang members, thereby possibly acting as couriers. The technology can also automatically flag gang members who should be kept separate from other individuals in the system. The agency can be kept current on all court or police activity, case disposition, warrants, new intelligence that affects a gang member's status, or any other factor that could be important.

Because each facility has the ability to input information on its own gang members, the department can quickly be notified of gangs' status changes, who the new leaders are, where they are, and so forth. If gang members change their appearance, this information can also be entered in a timely fashion and become part of the record. Transfers from one facility to another are tracked as they take place, so administrators can assess what risks such transfers pose.

If the data indicate certain movements, gang build-up, or other security threats, the agency can intervene. Interventions include conducting surprise searches, transferring specific gang leaders to minimize their influence, dispersing gang gatherings during recreation, and minimizing other opportunities for congregate activity.

**R**eviewing information in this database also provides an indication, when correlated with other data, of when and where it would be most expedient to conduct tactical searches. The database also minimizes inmates' movement when records have to be updated. Because the inmate's image is stored in a database along with all other information, it is not necessary to take additional pictures (except if an inmates's appearance has been altered). Unlimited reproductions of the stored image can be produced. This is extremely helpful when several facilities or agencies need to receive information simultaneously. Images can be electronically enhanced to aid identification.

Another significant benefit of the system is that if a facility uses digitized cameras, the cost of film can be eliminated. A comparatively inexpensive method of digitization is to use the standard camcorder found in most institutions and purchase a relatively inexpensive video capture apparatus (usually costing about \$200) to attach to any existing 386 or 486 computer that has eight megabytes of random access memory

(RAM). If a network is utilized, sixteen megs of RAM are recommended. The pictures taken by the camcorder can be digitized through the video capture

apparatus, and that video cassette can be used over and over to record more pictures that can also be digitized. This is

what the New York City Department of Correction has done. We are so encouraged by our success that we intend to digitize images of all inmates entering our system. Last year, more than 125,000 were admitted.

### Conclusion

Our success speaks for itself. This administration has experienced no significant negative gang activity, no major disruptions, and no major breaches of security associated with gang behavior. We are confident that, as we expand our efforts through teamwork and technology, we will enhance our ability to continue providing a safe and secure environment.

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